

Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation Full Commission Briefing

Meeting Summary

November 17, 1998

Commission members present:

Peter Bennett, Rick Bender, Don Briscoe, Greg Devereux, Roger Dormaier, Councilmember Dave Earling, Representative Ruth Fisher, Governor Booth Gardner, Representative Mary Margaret Haugen, Robert Helsell, Peter Hurley, Art Jackson, Commissioner Bettie Ingham, Jennifer Joly, John Kelly, Senator Valoria Loveland, Representative Maryann Mitchell, Tomio Moriguchi, Representative Ed Murray, Connie Niva, Commissioner Patricia Notter, Dale Nusbaum, Patricia Otley, Neil Peterson, Senator Dino Rossi, Skip Rowley, Dale Stedman, Commissioner Judy Wilson

Commission members not present:

Doug Beighle, Port Commissioner Ted Bottiger, Tim Ceis, Bob Dilger, Doug Hurley, Bill Lampson, Councilmember Richard McIver, Charles Mott, Senator Eugene Prince, Larry Pursley, John Rindlaub, Representative Karen Schmidt, Kenneth Smith, Commissioner Judie Stanton

Introduction

Project Manager Kjris Lund welcomed members and described the purpose of this first briefing day. It was to provide members with a first level of information to begin to answer some of their questions and to assist them in narrowing topics for Commission consideration. Additional detail on any of the presented topics would be available later upon request. Lund reminded members that there was a resource notebook at each place that included an agenda and the presentation slides to allow members to follow along during the briefings. The presentations were being videotaped for broadcast on TVW. Videotapes would also be available for individual review.

Briefings *(The following does not attempt to recap the presentations. It summarizes the question and answer discussion following each presentation.)*

PUBLIC OPINION AND TRANSPORTATION POLITICS -- PRESENTER LAIRD HARRIS

Q. What is known with respect to reducing automobile trips and how to interpret conflicting public opinions on transportation? For example, it is known that under some circumstances people may vote for increased taxes for transportation, yet we see that citizens in East King County do not support improvements to the SR 520 corridor.

A. Laird Harris noted that Metro and Sound Transit have done significant research about decisions to use public transit and that some data indicate there will be shifts in mode when the high capacity systems are in place.

Q. A member asked for more public opinion research on eastern Washington and comparing Washington to other states.

A. Laird Harris said that most of the research he had reviewed was about opinions in the Central Puget Sound area but some of the studies were state-wide and one compared two metropolitan regions in other parts of the country with Seattle. Some of what is known about eastern Washington concerns is that citizens feel that roadway maintenance is poor. Statewide, two out of three citizens of Washington say there is congestion where they drive.

Q. Was the pattern of voter support for R-49 partisan?

There were many competing issues in that vote, including the MVET reduction, the impact on general fund needs as well as partisan issues, so that it would be difficult to separate all of the issues out based on available data.

TRANSPORTATION STRUCTURES AND THEIR GOVERNANCE -- PRESENTER RON ANDERSON

Q. If “no one is in charge” of the system, are we describing chaos? Is there a better model elsewhere?

A. The system currently works fairly well. For example, on the east side of Lake Washington, local jurisdictions have identified \$1.3 billion in funding needs for projects that need to be built today (excluding improvements to SR 520 and I-405). For those projects there is \$400 million in available funding. The structure is not the problem, it is the lack of funding. There have been continual changes in the governance structure over the years. Generally, the trend has been to shift more control to local communities. Perhaps a single entity needs to centralize control for regional solutions such as regional arterials. Every state struggles with the same issues. Washington state is actually often cited as an example of a good DOT model. The one-third of states that do not have a transportation commission have much more politicized transportation systems.

Q. How we can assure that there is a close connection between planning on the state and local levels?

A. One suggestion has been breaking up the northwest WSDOT region into smaller regions. That has been proposed many times and there is an attempt underway now to make some administrative changes in that direction. Population shifts may dictate the need for such a realignment, but it has not been politically popular to this point.

Q. Is Washington a higher cost state in constructing roadways compared to other states?

A. The response was offered that much of that is attributable to the highly urbanized nature of much road construction in Washington. Rebuilding roads while keeping them open to traffic is very expensive, but it is not possible to shut down our freeways while we remodel them. Another issue raised was the role of RTPOs vis a vis the state. In the Puget Sound region, the PSRC has tended to place a lower priority on meeting roadway capacity needs. That has been the perspective of the 30 elected officials that make policy at the PSRC.

THE STATE TRANSPORTATION PLAN -- PRESENTER CHARLIE HOWARD

Q. What is WSDOT's role in aviation?

A. WSDOT owns 16 emergency landing strip airports and provides a general aviation grant fund for improvements. By and large, however, local governments control airports.

Q. What is the state doing with respect to the ESA (Endangered Species Act)?

A. The state is beginning to define the implications for transportation, including stormwater runoff issues as well as coordinated watershed planning.

Q. How do the Transportation Commission's objectives and priorities relate to the Legislative Transportation Committee (LTC)?

A. The Commission is legislatively charged in its prioritization. The legislature has broad authority to change priorities, in practice, however, most of the priorities set by the Commission remain. Criteria that set service objectives are not set by statute. But the federal government requires a financially constrained plan. The legislature can pick from both the service objectives list and the constrained list.

Q. How is the criterion of return on investment used to evaluate alternatives such as a mix of modes (e. g., transit and HOV)?

A. This is an area the state is struggling with, as are many states across the country. As an example, it was asked, how is the effectiveness of HOV lanes rated. There seems to be a lot of variance across the system. The numbers show that HOV lanes have more through-put than standard lanes, for example, in North King and Snohomish counties. Moving from 2+ occupants per car to 3+ increases the return. I-405 does not yet have significant transit volumes. But until the system is complete and fully integrated with transit, we cannot make a full evaluation.

Q. What is the federal share of Washington state's transportation funding?

A. About 25%. The state will receive an additional \$200 million per biennium with the passage of TEA-21. Additional questions were asked about the priorities in the "ribbon chart" and how the passage of R-49 affects them. The chart is not in strict order, but safety and preservation are on top. With R-49 funds, the line of what can be funded moves slightly to the right to include some mobility projects because it increases revenue from \$11.4 billion to \$13.6 billion.

THE WSDOT PRIORITIZATION PROCESS -- PRESENTER PAULA HAMMOND

Q. To what extent are new safety mandates and upgrades to roadways required by the federal government?

A. Such new requirements are often known a certain amount of time in advance so that upgrades can be phased in. There was no information on the costs over time of such new mandates. WSDOT has developed an approach using risk analysis to determine highest risk investments that FHWA has bought off on.

Q. What do the terms "congestion relief," "mobility," and "freight mobility" mean?

A. Congestion relief and mobility are similar in that they both look at the movement of people and goods. Freight mobility favors the movement of goods. None of these terms have priority over another in terms of weighting. Freight mobility has gained in visibility in recent years, however, people and goods use the same roads, so it is difficult to separate freight and general mobility.

Q. What is the significance of giving a high weight to benefit/cost ratio in evaluating projects, doesn't the state end up with all projects located in densely congested corridors?

A. The answer is "No," as each WSDOT region has an allocation of funds based upon lane miles and population. If the state were to move to a corridor-based approach, that would have to change. Benefit is calculated based on volume/capacity ratios, accident and delay savings, and percentage of trucks on the road. How does the state take into account the effect of induced demand, i.e., that the increased capacity is quickly used up? The state uses records of historical growth in traffic. There is a national debate over induced demand versus the transfer effect and potential benefits to the arterial system. Washington's formula is probably more sophisticated than most other states. But the San Francisco Bay area, for example, uses a much finer evaluation matrix than we do. Other states use popularity and politics.

Q. How is concurrency factored into plans?

A. The state works with local areas to determine which projects should go in the constrained plan, but it is not weighted. It happens informally. Local governments sometimes include and sometimes exclude state highways from concurrency.

CITY TIP AND PRIORITIZATION PROCESS -- PRESENTER DON CAIRNS

Q. Which regulations cause the most delays in getting a project built?

A. There are so many regulations at the state and local levels. Environmental regulations seem to cause the greatest delays. There are special concerns regarding the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Also, the grant application and funding process is slow and uncertain (localities are not able to count upon grant funding until it comes through).

Q. What was the significance of the sales tax exemption for R&D to Redmond?

A. Certain manufacturing and R&D businesses were granted a sales tax exemption on new construction. The financial impact on Redmond has been a loss of \$2.5 million a year just from Microsoft alone. The purpose of the sales tax exemption was to attract companies to the state, however, it represented a revenue loss to localities. Redmond had to institute a business license fee to make up the loss.

COUNTY TIP AND PRIORITIZATION PROCESS -- PRESENTER JERRY BRYANT

Q. What happens in rural areas when there is a big storm or other natural disaster?

A. The biggest effects are on the costs of snow plowing and the maintenance of gravel roads which tend to be the first to wash out in heavy weather conditions. Of the state's 39 counties, probably one-third are constantly having to make trade-offs between basic maintenance like re-graveling unpaved roads and dealing with winter and weather-related operations. Natural occurrences are a major financial setback. Over the last seven to ten years, Stevens County has not re-graveled its roads. Sometimes roads simply remain closed during the winter to save money. About 35% to 40% of Stevens County's budget is spent on its roads.

REGIONAL RTP/MPO PLANS -- PRESENTER DEAN LOOKINGBILL

Q. Are partnering requirements causing projects to take longer?

A. The diversity of funding sources sometimes slows projects down. The MPO is dealing with TEA-21 funding categories that are federally mandated, but it also looks at projects across state funding sources such as TIB. The layering of additional fund application and selection processes take longer and add administrative costs for the implementing agencies.

Q. How do regional plans and the state plan fit together?

A. The regional projects get ranked at the MPO and are then sent to the state for incorporation in to the state plan. Projects cannot receive federal dollars until they are in the state plan.

Q. How is concurrency planning managed?

A. SW Washington, the regional transportation plan was developed at the same time as the GMA comprehensive plans. Level of service (LOS) discussions for local and regional agencies took place simultaneously. Individual jurisdictions carry their projects into the regional process. If a local project is butting up against concurrency, it goes into the regional transportation plan as a high priority project. Clark County has had a concurrency process for 2-3 years, while the City of Vancouver is just coming on line.

Q. Who are the decision makers with the MPO?

A. The MPO has 21 member agencies, but there are only 14 representatives sitting on the RTC board. They comprise local elected officials including mayors of small cities. There is also an executive process whereby MPO staff meet unofficially with public works directors. As a federally mandated agency, the MPO has the authority to deny federal funds to a state mandated project, but has never used the authority.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND REGULATORY REFORM -- PRESENTER HARRY REINERT

Q. Has the Land Use Study Commission been involved with Endangered Species planning efforts?

A. The Land Use Study Commission has not been involved in addressing the salmon listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Many people are now focusing on a consolidated land use code, now that ESA has come into the forefront.

Q. What has been done regarding streamlining the environmental permitting process?

A. A 1995 Act allowed for a streamlined permit process at a Department of Ecology service center. The applicant gets help bringing all the agencies together, however, each agency still issues its own permit. The next stage would be to get one agency to be the lead and incorporate all conditions, state and local, into one permit. There may be a pilot project to test that. The process is now more rational, but not much shorter.

Q. What suggestions did the Land Use Commission have for reforms?

A. The Commission operates on consensus. There has been no agreement on a consolidated land use code or even on a consolidated permitting process. The environmental community fears the loss of environmental protection. The business community feels that the ideas for change do not go far enough. There is also a need for stability and not constant changing of regulations.

THE PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS -- PRESENTER BRIAN ZIEGLER

Q. What performance criteria are used by the WSDOT?

A. One criterion for performance is how well the agency spends its money. Others are FTEs, pavement conditions, bridge conditions, accident levels. There are about 50 criteria overall. WSDOT sets the bar for the time it takes to get from scoping to completion. There is some control but it is a guessing game.

Q. What is WSDOT's experience with new approaches such as design-build contracts?

A. WSDOT is looking at techniques borrowed from the private sector, for example, there are two design-build projects in process now. Legislative constraints hold back such experiments. Some environmental processes could be improved to get the document phase and the permit phase better in synch. That would allow permits to be issued earlier. Programmatic permits are also being developed and sought. The idea there is to do one or two permits for a certain type of project instead of several hundred project-based permits.

Q. At what point in the design process is the decision not to move forward with a project made?

A. Often the 'fatal flaw' is at the environmental phase. Generally, everything that goes into design and passes the environmental process, gets built, though it is sometimes 10 to 15 years later. Phasing affects how fast projects can be developed. Some of projects cost hundreds of millions and need to be phased. In other cases, there is simply a lack of trust in the department, and the project is still funded in phases. The agency would like to see those kinds of projects funded all at once, for the sake of efficiency.

Q. Does WSDOT agree that community and environmental group support is important to project success?

A. Support from neighborhood and environmental groups is often critical in getting projects done. They are stakeholders. They often act as the agency's conscience.

Q. Does WSDOT use the same process for all projects?

A. The same development process is used for a large project as for a small one. All of the steps apply, but the scale is different depending upon the project. The end product is the same: documents, permits, right-of-way, designs -- all of these are needed.

The final scheduled presentation on public-private programs was canceled.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 p.m.